

BRIDGES

Canadian University Curricula and Students from the Developing World

ROBERT J. MOORE

There are some foreign students from the Developing World whose interest in studying at Canadian universities is based more on their desire to make themselves marketable in the Developed world than to ~~make~~ make themselves available to the countries from which they come. For such students, the less the curriculum relates to the problems of the Third World the more relevant it is for their needs. But we are not concerned, in this paper, with that kind of student. Rather we are concerned with the student from the Developing World whose motivation in studying in Canadian universities is related to his desire to return to his own or a parallel society, there to put into operation the skills he (or she) has acquired at the Canadian university of his choice. For such students, the kind of courses offered and the orientation of these courses may present fundamental problems in the sense that they are not really prepared by the content of the curriculum for the particular kinds of problems with which they will have to deal on their return to the Developing World.

No one can reasonably expect a University in a Developed Society to cater specially for the needs of students from an altogether different kind of milieu, especially as this involves earmarking considerable funds in order to make this

possible. At a time when universities in Canada are facing a contraction of the finances formerly made available to them, it would seem unrealistic, if not churlish, to expect them to devote an important part of their expenditure towards catering for the special needs of Third World students. It would seem more reasonable, and certainly more commendable, in the eyes of those who control the purse strings, that faculties and departments concentrate their energies on subjects and skills needed in Canada in particular, and in North America in general, so as to attract more funding from Governments and the Foundations.

And yet it is clear that the presence of foreign students in Canada is considered by members of faculty to be an important ingredient of university life and an important link between Canadian universities and the countries from which those students come. Equally significant is the fact that numbers of Canadian academics have developed research interests in subjects and problems peculiar to the Developing World and are themselves concerned that these special interests should, to some extent, be paralleled by the presence of students from those societies which have attracted their notice. But most important of all is the awareness among members of the faculty that Canadian universities would be doing themselves considerable dis-service if their outlook were turned inwards. It is one thing, those who take this view argue, to lament the paucity of interest taken in Canadian studies, but it is another thing to completely concentrate on North American studies to the exclusion of interest in areas of the World where changes are traumatic and where some of the most staggering human problems are pervasive.

The constant reiteration of the theme that the world is a global village has not impelled the vast majority of Canadian academics to address their minds to global problems. But it has had the effect of making a considerable body of Canadian academics aware of the problems of the Developing World and has stimulated their interest in analysing these problems as well as in suggesting methods of combatting them. Along with this sensitivity goes a potent conviction that universities - or at least some of their Faculties - should be bridges between the thought processes normative in the Developing World and those normative in the Developed one. There is an increasing number of university teachers and researchers who, in the face of powerful talk about a "poverty curtain" separating two sections of the earth, wish to keep the line open between Canadians and their universities on the one hand and the peoples of the Developing World and their universities on the other.

To preserve this sensitivity, to keep the lines of communication open, and to help in the process of arriving at reciprocal relationships between members of the two sides of the Great Divide, it is important that students from the Developing World continue to study in Canada and to be exposed to the perceptions and concepts current in a Developed North American society, whilst at the same time learning to deepen the perceptions and concepts current in their own Third World societies. But here precisely is the kernel of the problem. Canadian universities were nearly all founded at a time when it was the prevailing assumption that the world would grow more progressive, and more peace as it grew more westernised, and that a spread of western nostrums and prescriptions to the countries of Africa, As

the Middle East, the Caribbean and Latin America would unite in a common global outlook large groups of people whose position in society would allow them to create structures capable of westernising those who did not study at the universities of the West.

The conviction of a universal ethos created in the image of industrialised society has now largely been discredited. Since the great decade of development - the 1960's - there has been a massive turning away from the thesis that what developed the West will necessarily develop the rest. And the models that were once so messianically purveyed as infallible recipes for curing underdevelopment are now globally forgotten or excused as the symptoms of an era over-sanguine about its capabilities.

One result of the conviction that the Developing World must find its own road to development, and that the nostrums fathered in what is called the West are not ipso facto relevant to its problems, has been the demand for more universities in Developing Societies - universities closely related to Governments' development programmes and whose function is to quicken the understanding of local society. The number of students, en masse, who once trekked to Europe or North America for their university education has proportionately diminished, as more and more institutions of higher education have come into existence in Developing Societies to cater for the awakened educational appetites of their citizens. But shortage of funds, chronic in many parts of the Third World, and shortage of top level academics, equally chronic, have dictated to these institutions of higher learning an inability to cope with the widening demand for

higher education. Consequently there are still large numbers of students desirous of studying at universities in Canada, the United States and Europe. For those who intend to return to their own countries this raises a crucial problem: how can they relate the skills and knowledge they have acquired - skills and knowledge based on concepts and needs nurtured in Developed Societies - to the living situations to which they will return. On the one hand there is the desire of these students to find in the courses they pursue insights and competence which will help them to diagnose more rigorously the sources of some of the problems in their own societies, as well as the measures they can devise to cope with them. On the other hand there is a desire, to which I alluded above, of a substantial number of staff members at Canadian universities to keep an awareness of the Developing World alive and an analytical approach to its problems kicking. The combination of these two desires ought to create an interest in bringing the curricula of some Canadian universities closer both to the needs of the students from the Developing World and to the academic interest which some members of Faculty have in that world.

It is this to which I would now like to turn my attention. In the first place it would be unrealistic to expect a large proportion of Canadian universities to insert Third World content into their curricula. For one thing there are universities in Canada to which very few Third World students go; for another thing some Canadian universities devote themselves with heavy and legitimate emphasis to the study of specialised areas of Canadian experience. Where there is no special tradition of interest in Developing Societies it may be prudent not to try to create one. But

there are universities which have a long tradition of encouraging students from the Developing World, and to the life and quality of which such students have made significant contributions. In such universities it is useful to take stock of this tradition and to enlarge its ambience by actually mounting departments or faculties devoted to meeting the needs of students from the Third World. An example will suffice. I take it from the Caribbean because it is the area that I know best and because, in moving around the universities of Canada and in talking to Caribbean students, I have been able to arrive at some palpable impressions of the situation.

It is difficult for students from the Caribbean to pursue a co-ordinated study of the Caribbean experience, or of the Caribbean environment, in any Canadian university. There may be one or two professors in a particular department who have an interest in some aspect of the Caribbean experience but there are no Institutes of Caribbean Studies which would allow them to offer a student a considerable number of courses in his undergraduate degree in this area. Yet there is a growing Caribbean population in Canada and the off-spring of that population will increase the Caribbean element in Canadian society significantly. Some of them, concerned to forget their past, will not be interested in looking at the Caribbean through the academic spectacles. But the large majority of them, because they form "a visible minority" will feel it imperative to deepen the sense of their heritage the more deeply they become engrossed in Canadian society.

An Institute of Caribbean Studies in a Canadian university can offer special advantages of perspective to both

Canadians and West Indians, which such an institute in the Caribbean cannot do. In the first place, set in an environment not profoundly similar to the area of its concentration, an Institute of Caribbean Studies will be forced to take a comparative approach to the content of its curricula. In short, the more deeply it leads the student into perceptions of the Caribbean, the more forcefully it will impel him to compare those perceptions with the prevalent notions of Canadian society. A Caribbean student maturing in such an environment will have the distinct advantage over his Caribbean brother at home in being able to see himself, his culture and his living environment set off against the culture and environment of Canada. And thus he will normally be advantaged by a broader perspective than will those who study the Caribbean in the Caribbean.

But the argument is equally effective if turned around. An Institute of Caribbean studies, where Canadian students try to learn something about a society not their own, will have the effect not merely of making a number of Canadians more sensitive to the Caribbean but also of making those same Canadians more perspicacious about themselves. For the study of another culture and another environment under the guidance of experts in the field, both indigenous to the society and from outside it, usually has the effect of setting one-self in bold relief, and thus of sharpening the awareness of one's identity as well as broadening the sense of relationships between two cultural entities.

An Institute of Caribbean Studies could well, as is being slowly discovered in England, help to dispel some of the prevailing stereotypes and misapprehensions about the

Caribbean immigrant community whose children are already native born Canadians of a colour different from those of other native born Canadians. Such an institute - which would include the study of the economic structures of the Caribbean, its historical experience, its ethnicity, its linguistic formats and its literature - could well become a think tank for the Canadian Government in its approach to, and day-to-day dealings with, Caribbean Governments and Caribbean institutions.

It is better to have one or two universities in Canada with fully fledged institutes for the study of regions than to have widely scattered throughout Canadian universities experts who conduct single courses of varying degrees of intensity on their regions, but who are not grouped together for more co-operative academic approaches. This is certainly one of the things about which students from the Developing World complain most vigorously, and with considerable justification.

A course, for instance, in the rural agriculture of India may depend entirely on the presence of a single academic in a department of economics or agriculture with whose departure, on sabbatical or to another university, the course comes to an abrupt end. The sense of isolation that the professor interested in a special aspect of the Developing World suffers among his colleagues not so disposed may not act as a deterrent to his continuing interest in the subject, but it certainly predisposes him to be away from his department for as much time as he can, to continue his research in the country where his material exists. This reduces his availability to those students who would wish to share that

For better cross-pollination between academics interested in specific regions of the Developing World, for clusters of students stimulating each other and for the better programming of such studies, as well as for the greater impact of such studies on Canadian consciousness, it is meaningful to establish institutes oriented towards Third World areas in particular universities, which would then expect to have quotas of students from those areas.

If curricula are so designed as to concentrate on particular regions, another boon results. Instead of rigid departmentalisation of studies, experiments in inter-relatedness can be mounted - as, in fact, they have been at certain British universities, notably that of Sussex. This is not to say that any break-down of the traditional departmentalisation of studies should be considered more mature than the prevailing format. But when one considers the shortage of skilled manpower in the Third World and the enforced "renaissance" outlook of most of the skilled personnel in those societies, one sees that it is necessary for them in their years of training to be exposed to other dimensions of thought and research, and not merely to the discipline they have chosen. For on return to their native societies they will be called upon to deal with multi-faceted problems involving a knowledge of many approaches, and they will not normally be able to assemble a team of experts - each sacrosanct within his own discipline - to assist them in approaching those problems.

An institute for the study in an area can, without risking academic disrepute, practise a prudent kind of interdisciplinary activity. And the resultant range of insights

and perceptions available to both the members of staff and the students will greatly increase the attractiveness of the institution, because of its proven utility to those who return to their native societies.

There are other significant advantages to institutes concerned with the study of particular areas. One of them certainly is the fertility of academic exchange. It goes without saying that it is a salutary thing for students and academics in the Developing World to have the presence of Canadians in their midst for reasonable periods, as it is for Canadians to have the presence of Third World Academics among them. An expert in his field, native to a Developing Society, is more attracted to spending a sabbatical year or even an exchange year at a Canadian university if he knows he is going to an institute which specialises in the study of the region from which he comes. There he will be aware that a number of fruitful activities are open to him. He will be assured that, in the course of his duties, he will act as external examiner for post graduate theses which concentrate on his region. He is bound to meet one or two other academics, not necessarily from his own country, but certainly from the region of which his country forms a part, with whom to share ideas and research awareness. But most important of all in the light of the subject of this paper, he will be able to engage in teaching students from both the Canadian and Developing Societies interested in his particular field.

For the Third World students this offers many advantages. These students are always in search, inevitably, of positions from which they can develop clear perceptions of their own

society by looking at it through the eyes of foreign academics as well as through the eyes of native ones. They literally live in the comparative approach. If, because of the presence of an institute, there is a continuous dialogue between the visiting Third World academics and the Canadian experts, then the students can experience this comparison in a structured, orderly method. The resulting detachment of view which allows them to look at their society with fresh eyes is well calculated to increase their attachment of feeling to the society because of the rising fascination stimulated by the comparative method. This advantage can be more clearly seen by taking the negative approach. In the absence of an institute the presence of one professor of Third World origin in a department usually implies a large attachment of Third World students to that professor. Expecting that he will give them the "correct" view of their society many Third World students tend to listen to him with conviction. They know they must listen to the views of other members of the specific department who are Canadians; but they often do so in order to ensure passing their examinations by rehashing what they regard as the "mandatory orthodoxies". This can lead to rather unsatisfactory situations. With one part of their being they accept analyses and nostrums as true, but not available for proper university exposure; and with another part of their being they accept analyses and nostrums as false but utilitarian for the purpose of getting their degrees. This leads, not to a maturing of conceptions by an examination of differences, but to lopsided thinking and to a cynicism about academic authenticity.

Obviously an institute of regional concern will go a long way to obviate this dilemma. In such an institute the

presence of academics in Developing Societies sharing research interests with Canadian or North American academics spawns an intellectual activity in which there is no question of genuineness unavailable to examinations and a lack of genuineness which examinations evoke.

This is a much healthier atmosphere in which students from the Third World can pursue their courses. But there is another significant advantage to having such institutes. As has been experienced elsewhere, institutes of regional studies develop their own esprit de corps. Students and staff develop a comparative rapport. Discussions go on not only in the common rooms of the institute but also round the coffee tables and in the cafes, and the Canadian experts come to be seen less as "them" and more as "us", which is a consummation devoutly to be wished in any situation where native academics and foreign students meet.

But there is another advantage to having these institutions. The common commitment to an area, felt by both Canadians and the Third World students, leads not only to the emanation of learned publications, highly technical and scrupulous of the full academic protocol; it also leads to student publications usually of a more informed though perhaps not less colourful nature than the standard campus publication. It leads, too, to the formation of societies, devoted to particular aspects of the regions' concerns as well as to translating the whole ethos of the region into terms understandable by the host society outside of the university.

A Third World student pursuing his courses in such an institution will not feel the need to retreat into a cocoon

formed of his own countrymen nor will he necessarily be the victim of those aggressive impulses often created by the feeling of isolation from the rest of campus life. Confident that he is in a community in which he could without apology deepen his knowledge of his own region, he expresses that confidence in his relationships with members of the host society both academic and non-academic in a rather open and enquiring attitude. In short he becomes, because of his increasing self assurance, neither overly diffident nor overly dissident.

This is not a problem to be underestimated when considering the relationships between Third World students and their campus environment. Some of them feel that the only way in which they can be accepted both academically and socially is to out-Canadian the Canadians. Apart from the fact that this does damage to their authenticity as people, it is a strong deterrent to their returning to their own societies. Or worse. It may mean that when they return to their own societies they are less than useful because they demand to have structures, equipment and attitudes which are available only in North America.

The other side of the coin is, of course, the near total rejection of the campus environment and even of any meaningful relationship with the non-campus environment which is noticeable among a number of Third World students. They cannot get back to their own societies fast enough; they often suffer academically because much of their mental energy is devoted to coping with their own isolation. But most important of all they may, and frequently do, take back to their own societies an outlook considerably narrower than their four or five years residence in a university

It is one thing to return to one's own society with a more lucid perspective and a more potent attachment to it as a result of having studied abroad. That is healthy. It is another to return to one's society with a fanatic espousal of some of its facets and a considerably narrower view of its lineaments, because one was too uncomfortable abroad to look at it with the objectivity born of emotional equilibrium. The first sort of returnee is a far more sagacious exponent of his society's interests and a far more resourceful negotiator, because he is a far more penetrating interpreter of the international scene than is the second.

Where there are no institutes, because it is not possible to structure them, but where there is a respectable minority of Third World students, a useful course of action is to create an "International Students House" as an integral part of campus institutions under the umbrella of which Third World students can meet not only to relate to each other, but to relate to the teaching community. If such a House is taken seriously by the campus administrators, then even the limited funding available for such an institution can be used to promote the visits of eminent Third World thinkers. Contact between such thinkers and the students will steadily increase their esprit de corps and also give them a chance, unavailable in the curricula, to do some serious thinking about their own societies.

I know of one or two universities in Canada, not to be mentioned, where such institutions do exist; and if I am to be allowed a personal note, I have myself visited them and

spent periods talking with the students about Third World realities and Third World movements. The appointment of a sensitive academic to oversee such institutions as well as to make contact with visiting scholars and thinkers goes a long way towards helping the students themselves to relate what they learn from these visitations to their chosen studies. In short, although the "comparative existence" of the Third World students would not be as structured and as defined as where an institute for regional studies exists, the presence of the "international house" with its programme can stimulate the Third World student into doing his own comparative thing in conjunction with his fellows.

Such Houses tend to generate programmes that are the results of negotiations between the director and the students themselves. Certainly on campuses in the United States such Houses have been known to raise some of their own funds in order to secure the services, for brief periods, of seminal thinkers from Developing Societies. The presence of these thinkers is often recognised by the formal administration of the university by the device of asking him or her to be available for exposure to various departments; and a relationship is often struck up between the visiting scholar and specific departments which leads to increased contacts between members of those departments and the areas from which the scholars come. Wherever such Houses exist, although the structured intellectual activity of an institute is not evident, yet equally un-evident are the strong symptoms of alienation from the host society suffered by many Third World students.

The presence of such Houses has in some cases in the United States - and there is no reason why this should not happen in Canada - led to what used to be called "the twinning arrangement" between a North American university and one from a developing society. I use twinning in the past tense largely because it was an arrangement that often involved the temporary migration of North American academics to the twin university in the Third World but not much of a migration in the opposite direction. In the case of one Canadian university I know of, a "special relationship" between itself and a university in a Developing country is being established, one of the fundamental aims of which is a genuine reciprocity of expertise to temper some of the acerbic differences created by what I referred to earlier as "the Great Divide". This special relationship is bound to be welcomed by the Third World students at the particular Canadian university, since the terms of their intellectual discourse will be rendered both wider and more complex by the frequent presence on their campus of professors who may use the same methodology of research as the Canadian academics do, but who start from different postulates born of their differing positions on the globe.

No paper of this kind, unless it indulges in the voluminous nature of a monograph, can make all the viable suggestions for enriching the stimulus offered by the curricula of Canadian universities to Third World students and deepening the intellectual discourse of those students themselves. But this paper was meant only as a point of departure for discussion on the subject of its title and if I have used specific examples and personal experience, it is because my conversations with students from my own region have alerted me to some of the anxieties they feel and some of the suggestions they have made

I do not think it is too soon for Canada, which in the official statements of its leaders is described as a bridge country, to strengthen its capacity for bridge building with the Developing World through its universities. Nor have I detected any powerful reluctance to do so on the part of the many academics who, because of their travels and their interests, have developed or are developing concerns wider than North America. The question is how to relate the Canadian university ethos to students from the Third World in such a way that the traditions peculiar to Canadian universities remain intact, but also adaptable to the overwhelming needs of Third World students to become more competent to cope with the problems of their societies. This paper consists of the personal suggestions of a former academic for moving in that direction.